

How Does a Poem Mean?

Modes of Expression in *Sonnets from the Portuguese*

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*Abstract. How does a poem mean? A formalist approach to Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* (1850) may provide a partial answer by demonstrating a poetry-specific potential of meaning-creation. To this end, this essay offers new perspectives on Barrett Browning's playful interventions against a one-dimensional love discourse through poly-dimensional semiotics and explores how her sonnets expand the scope of linguistic expressability by transcending central axiomata of Saussurian structuralism avant la lettre. Numerous acrostics permeating the sonnets subvert their putative senses, but for a lack of formalist analysis, these have not previously been discovered and negotiated in scholarly works. This essay demonstrates how throughout *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the fictional order is unhinged and the diegesis shifts to the reader's material reality as language becomes indexical. Thus, space for a simultaneousness of contradictory discourses is melded in the tension between poetic form and explicit meaning, within which the woman poet creates and asserts her voice.*

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A poem is a peculiar composition. At first glance, the reader recognizes the traditionally 'poetic' text as such by its line breaks, stanzas, and perhaps rhymes. But is form all that separates poetry from prose? If we were to squeeze the latest article from *The Guardian* into this spatial template, would that be a poem? The playful intricacies of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* suggest that there is, perhaps, a domain-specificity to the linguistics of poetry as a function for expanding the scope of semantic creation.

Barrett Browning was already a celebrated poet when she published this sonnet sequence in 1850. Alongside Tennyson, she was one of England's most highly acclaimed poets and was recognized as an influential voice by readers, critics, and peers. Half a century later, however, her poetry did not meet with the same level of appreciation from the public. John William Cunliffe, for instance, claimed in 1908 that her 'most enduring contributions to literature' came in the form of her roles as Robert Browning's wife and as auxiliary to his oeuvre. Another fifty years later, popular familiarity with her work was limited to a selective canonisation of her poetry in anthologies and literary histories, with *Sonnets from the Portuguese* usually introduced as a testimony to her status as Robert's loving muse. It was not until the 1970s that feminist critics such as Ellen Moers, Cora Kaplan, Sandra Gilbert, and Susan Gubar rediscovered other aspects of Barret Browning's work, mostly concentrating on Aurora Leigh's (1856) female voice. From this point onwards, scholars have produced valuable analyses of her poetry from socio-political and historicising viewpoints, but rarely from a formalist perspective (cf. Stone and Taylor, pp. 392ff.).

It is unsurprising that formalist and structuralist schools of criticism have largely ignored Barrett Browning's work, as the resurgence of critical interest in her oeuvre came at a time when these approaches had already, to some extent, fallen out of vogue. Notably, in *Victorian Poetry and the Culture of Evaluation* (2020) Clara Dawson comprehensively attends to Barrett Browning's form in regard to her *Drama of Exile* (1845), acknowledging the semiotic depth of her formal structures, especially rhymes. This exploratory essay seeks to initiate a further closure of this gap in research pertaining to the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* and offers a new perspective on the poetics of form and the linguistic playfulness of Barrett Browning's sonnet sequence. Looking beyond the contextualising, thematic, and political approaches typical to analyses of her work, it focuses on the techniques that facilitate new forms of expression within the sonnets.

The implicit discourse on poetics and intricate compositions permeating Barrett Browning's *Sonnets from the Portuguese* as they subversively negotiate the notion of text as a chain of words, the arbitrariness of the sign, and the primacy of the sound image avant la lettre demonstrate that there is an inherent semiotic potential specific to poetry which transcends Saussurian structuralism. Caroline Levine, commenting on Barrett Browning's political poetry, states that these 'metrically experimental and overtly political meditations [...] frustrate the reflective, expressive, and ideological models of reading'. She suggests that Barrett Browning's rhythms function as means of disruptive expression within a persuasive alignment of content and form, both expressing and performing disruption (p. 238). The *Sonnets* also make use of expressive form. The following analysis, however, suggests that 'content and form' create semiotic counter-spheres rather than indicating alignments. Thereby, the sonnets subvert and recreate concepts of reality, selfhood, and love beyond that which mere syntactical logic is able to express. A discourse of love emerges in *Sonnets from the Portuguese* which resists expressing itself and subverts regular narrative strategies.

Put simply, this formalist proposal focuses on exploring how the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* achieve meaning rather than on what their meaning is. Specifically, it will explain how Barrett Browning manufactures implicit poetics with striking semiotic focal points. She does so by means of the subversion of the diegetic framework as well as the referential function of speech on the one hand, and, on the other hand, by transferring the diegesis into the materiality of its text, rendering words indexical, and creating meaning through poetic form. By means of these structures, personhood, agency, and voice can be renegotiated in a dialectic composition between poeticity and face value meaning, as the latter fails to encompass a more ambitious love discourse and an independent agency of the woman poet within a romantic partnership.

1. Diegetic subversion

The Sonnets from the Portuguese decisively problematise the creation of voice and meaning. Absence, fissuring and uncertainty are hallmarks of Barrett Browning's language. The diegetic world is deconstructed as its order collapses and its inhabitants – somewhat – cease to exist.

Barrett Browning's use of metonymic tropes, formations of negatives, and imagery relating to absence destabilises the objects of the poetic world. Precise definition of

selfhood or of the I-you dyad is generally avoided. As the reader encounters characterisations of the personae within the sonnet sequence, they appear indirect, imprecise, and blurry: the Belovèd, for instance, is never a prince, but only 'princely' (III, 1; VIII, 2) and never a king, but 'like a king' (XVI, 2). Physical selves are regularly portrayed within metonymies of peripheral headspace. To this end, both personae give their locks of hair as representations of their whole self (cf. XVIII; XIX) and love received transforms into crowns (XII, 3; XXI, 11; XXXVIII, 10).

Besides metonymy, there are generally two main strategies used to subvert the totality of personae in the *Sonnets*. The first involves skewed allocations of personhood: whilst the persona of the speaker in XXVII, for instance, restricts herself to a role of passivity, i.e. that of witness, the abstract concepts of Love and Death attain agency. The capitalisations of the nouns referring to these concepts suggest their role as quasi-personae¹:

[I m]ake witness, here, between the good and bad,
That Love, as strong as Death, retrieves as well.
(13f)

The second is a disassembling of conceptual boundaries. The diegetic world systematically appears personified, blurring the boundaries of the personae as it transitions to a meta-persona itself. For instance:

The face of all the world [...]
(VII, 1)

Additionally, systematically placed linguistic and figurative negatives throughout the sequence subvert a meaningful description of the personae's selfhoods. Sonnet VIII, for instance, describes them as 'unstained', 'untold' (3), 'unexpected' (6), '[u]ngrateful' (8) and 'not cold' (9); XIII proceeds with 'unwon' (11), 'dauntless' and 'voiceless' (13), and so forth.

Inverted physical appearances also substitute the personae's physicality within the diegetic world:

For thine and thee, an image only so
Formed of the sand, and fit to shift and break.
(XXXVII, 3f)

Thy purity of likeness and distort
Thy worthiest love to a worthless counterfeit.
(XXXVII, 9f)

The self-image in the sand – whether drawn (negative) or sculptured (positive) – represents the self as form, not matter, either as a photographic negative or as similar to a mask. The 'counterfeit' mirrors a similar – shape-reduced – conception. Furthermore,

¹ All references to the sonnet sequence follow the first edition: Barrett Browning, Elizabeth: *Poems*, London 1850.

the counterpart cannot be held within the notion of purity, as it is immediately undermined by its distortion.

An additional concept of shape-reduced negatives may be found in the recurring shadow theme. The very first contact between the lovers in sonnet I is sub-physical (via a shadow) and then peripheral (via the hair). The Belovëd does not appear as a personal essence or physical whole, but as a shape. And even as such he is impalpable and unspecific (mystic). However, only this encapsulation of nothingness and indefiniteness is capitalised and thus appears as a persona or, rather, as an empty vessel within which a person should be.

A shadow across me. Straightway I was 'ware
So weeping, how a mystic Shape did move
Behind me, and drew me backward by the hair;
(I, 9-11)

In sonnet VI, the imagined romantic unification is diluted to a barely physical togetherness, as the shadow is a mere representation of shape (2). The physicality of the encounter is thus non-existent, as the shadow represents the absence of matter. The end of the sonnet resumes this trope; the shade is placed both within the memory (as a 'Before') and the grave (as one's 'After'). Hence, the shade here appears as a chronological negative of self, as between one's before and after is all there is of one, but this formulation suggests the persona's existence as a 'gap'.

My poet, thou canst touch on all the notes
God set between His After and Before,
[...]
Sad memory, [...]
A shade, in which to sing – [...]
A grave, on which to rest from singing? [...]
(XVII, 1f; 12f)

The inhabitants and objects of the diegetic world are unsettled and undermined in their physical existence. It therefore comes as no surprise that many sonnets in the first half of the sequence (e.g. III; V; VII; IX; XV; XVI, 14) also end in tropes of movement.

Clara Dawson posits that Barrett Browning's style indicates 'excess, complication, and mist.' (Dawson 91) In the early reception of her work in the 1830s and 1840s, this has caused criticism: she was 'condemned for obscurity, ungainliness, mysticism, preposterous rhyme and metre.' (cf. *ibid*) The broad spectrum of the aforementioned strategies circumnavigating definition and subverting any fixation within the diegetic world, however, suggests a wilful deconstruction rather than negligence (or even lack of expertise). Rather than allowing the reader to be drawn into the diegetic world and, for a short moment, believe its reality, the sonnets foreground the fictionality of the diegesis by perpetually undermining any template within which it may be clearly imagined. Fiction seems exposed as an insufficient container of a personhood sought, of love in freedom, of independent agency, and of a powerful poetic voice. But the *Sonnets* go further, indicating implicit mistrust and subversion of its linguistic medium itself, as will be shown below.

2. Semiotic subversion

On a meta-level, the negation and unsettling of definition is also a semiotic issue, as language and speech cannot hold their diegetic world. Take for instance sonnet VII:

'The names of country, heaven, are changed away'
(10)

Stone and Taylor remark that Barrett Browning intersperses a wide array of 'dialogically engaged voices' throughout her oeuvre, from desire to grief and beyond (p. 392f). It may be argued that on one side of a dialectic composition, the voice of this sonnet sequence is one that proves powerless. Verbal utterances fail, as does their linguistic medium more generally. Three related utterances in sonnet XXIII can serve as examples:

'Yes, call me by my pet-name!'
(1)

'While I call God – call God! – [...]'
(9)

'Yes, call me by that name, – [...]'
(13)

Through the allocation of a pet-name, the speaker emphatically allows its counterpart, the Belovéd, to affirm an indirect definition of selfhood and relationship by means of language. However, the breadth of registers employed throughout the sonnet subverts this very effect. First, the speech-based dyad of you and I is triangulated by its members' relationship with God (a recurring theme). Second, not only the call to God but also the Belovéd calling the prime persona by her name is followed by a silent dash. Third, the wording of the second appeal to the Belovéd renders the requested action more distant: 'my' becomes 'that', the 'pet-name' becomes a more neutral 'name', and the silent dash and comma replace the demanding exclamation mark².

From sonnet XXIII onward, each step of the romantic approach is accompanied by the interjection 'o/oh' (idealisation in XXXVII; the first kisses in XXXVIII; affirmation and acceptance of the other's affection in XL):

Pardon, oh, pardon, that my soul should make
Of all that strong divineness which I know
For thine and thee [...]
(XXXVII, 1-3)

[...]
Than that first kiss. The second passed in height

² Pauline Simonsen ties the broken syntax to the persona's loss of identity and social integration: 'The speaker has been left forlorn of unconditional love and affirmation of identity.' (Simonsen, p. 71).

The first, and sought the forehead, and half missed,
Half falling on the hair. O beyond meed!
(XXXVIII, 7-9)

Oh, yes! they love through all this world of ours!
(XL, 1)

Both speech and language thus fail in moments of supposed definition. This system of semiotic subversion is established as early as sonnet II. In this poem, the persona hears 'this word' (II, 2) spoken by her counterpart. A conversation might ensue, but the stanza's syntax immediately disintegrates:

One of us...that was God...and laid the course (II, 4)

Time and again in the sequence, when the lovers approach each other, emotionally or physically, sentences dissolve into elliptic debris:

Thou wait beside me for the wind to blow
The grey dust up, . . . those laurels on thine head,
(V, 10f)

For where thou art, or shall be, there or here;
And this . . . this lute and song . . . loved yesterday,
(VII, 11f)

I love thee . . . mark! . . . I love thee --- in thy sight
I stand transfigured [...]
(X, 6f)

To come and touch my hand . . . a simple thing,
Yet I wept for it!—this, . . . the paper's light . . .
(XXVIII, 7f)

At other points in the sequence, the reader is confronted with a plethora of modes of speech that fail to communicate. In sonnet XXI, for instance, lines 2-3 read:

[...] Though the word repeated
Should seem a 'cuckoo-song', as though dost treat it,

The word as bird song is a word beyond clear comprehension, to the human ear more ornamental than comprehensible. The rhyme employed in these lines, a rare female cadence, adds an unstressed syllable to the end of each verse, thereby suggesting a sense of quietness. In line 8, the reader finds a destabilised relationship between reality and the spoken in the 'doubtful spirit-voice,' while line 9 demands:

Cry, "Speak once more—thou lovest!"

Crying poses an expression of emotions rather than a transfer of concrete elaborated meaning. This is followed by a remarkably expressive structure of repetition:

Say thou dost love me, love me, love me – toll
 The silver iterance! –
 (12f)

The repetition of the affirmation of love in lines 12f ties into the ambiguity of toll. On the one hand, one may understand this in the sense of paying a toll, but on the other it implies a sound – that of a bell tolling, for example. If the reader assumes the latter meaning, the mantra-like repetition chimes with the structure of tolling. Either version transfers the utterance to a lifeless sphere. As the colour of silver is already tied to an ambiguous topos between love and death in sonnet I (cf. 13f), the toll as payment invokes the ferry toll across the Acheron. The toll as the repetitive affirmation of love equates these avowals to the sound of an inanimate object such as a bell. Thus, the ‘love-me’ is pushed away from the sphere of meaningful human communication. Finally, in line 14, the persona demands:

To love me also in silence with thy soul.

However, the expression of love in ‘silence’ naturally suggests the absence of its expression. The poetic romance appears as a negative abstractum: it is the textual expression of inexpressibility, and its discourse is simultaneously the rejection of its discourse.

While negative imagery and its grammatical expressions, as shown above, undermine the validity of diegetic constructions as appropriate space and means for the love sought, the *Sonnets* here further suggest the insufficiency of its language as a container for a perhaps more ambitious concept of love and poetic existence. Personhood and, with the loss of language, poetic agency dissolve where diegetic love seems to be achieved. However, the *Sonnets* offer an alternative dimension for both the authorial agent and the personae’s romantic discourse: text as diegesis rather than its medium.

3. Text as diegesis, not its medium

Collapsing speech is only one side of the dialectic equation seen in the sonnet sequence; the other introduces an empowered mode of speech and expressive functions of text, as the sonnets’ diegetic world fuses materially with its medium. An intricate network of references dissolves the boundary between the text and its inhabitants, including inanimate objects. On a discursive level, the boundary between poetry and person becomes increasingly blurred. ‘Instruments defaced’ (XXXII, 13), for instance, personify the symbol of poetry evoked in XXXII, while the persona is equated to an instrument herself. Simonsen posits that the speaker ‘has become the instrument for the master musician to play upon’ (Simonsen, p. 68); she is thus rendered a medium rather than a person:

[...] For perfect strains may float
 ‘Neath master-hands, from instruments defaced,–
 And great souls, at one stroke, may do and doat.
 (12-14)

Sonnet XXXVIII explicates the unity of romantic physicality and poetry. First, the Belovéd's kiss on her hands triggers the meta-poetic trope of her writing:

[...] he but only kissed
The fingers of this hand wherewith I write;
(1f)

Second, his kiss on her hair evokes key imagery of the sonnet sequence (hair, chrism, crown, 9f). The final tercet then comprises one of his kisses on her lips (cf. 12), leading to her ability to verbally express her affirmation of love:

I have been proud and said, "My love, my own."
(14)

Physical affection, while having been regularly subverted and avoided thus far, now reaches a space in which it may exist: in poetry and speech. Letters, on the other hand, are positioned within the *conditio humana* of life and death:

My letters! All dead paper, mute and white!
And yet they seem alive and quivering
(XXVIII, 1f)

The subsequent line then equates the quivering letters to her hands via the parallelism of matching movements ('tremulous'). In XLII, the persona has gained control over her life, as the latter is dependent on her writing:

I seek no copy now of life's first half:
Leave here the pages with long musing curled,
And write my new future's epigraph,
(11-13)

With the image of the 'copy', life is drawn into the materiality of texts, and the persona's future appears simply as a performance of written instructions. Moreover, the pages are 'curled' and thereby equated to the persona's hair, the key metonymic figure of selfhood.

Another *pars-pro-toto* metonymy as prevalent as that of the hair represents the foot/feet, with nine mentions throughout the sequence. In its ambiguity, this motif playfully alludes to a tension between form and content; the poetic ambivalence of feet as the body part and the metrical unit blurs the boundary between human physicality and poetry. In XX for instance, the persona describes a visual impression of the other's absence:

And saw no footprint, heard the silence sink
No moment in thy voice, [...]
(4f)

However, the image transcends its visuality by juxtaposing the absence of noise. The foot may also be read as ambiguous, as the print alludes to material texts and the sinking and silence may evoke the notion of a sinking within a metrical foot. This theme

is recurring. In IV, the dancers' footing is juxtaposed with high poems, thereby commingling the physical footing with a second poetic meaning.

Most gracious singer of high poems! where
The dancers will break footing, [...]
(2f)

In V, the foot is tied to scorn, shifting the body part towards the realm of language.

thy foot in scorn
(7)

While being linked to the poetic symbol of the musical instrument, the stressed and unstressed nature of metrical feet is also repeatedly alluded to in XLI.

But though, who, in my voice's sink and fall
[...]
Own instrument didst drop down at thy foot
(7-9)

One particularly remarkable example of the fusion of textuality with diegesis and a poetry-specific interplay of form and narrative is the disruption of the regular rhyming pattern in sonnet XXIX. Firstly, the B-rhyme ('tree', 'see', 'thee', 'instantly', 2; 3; 6; 7) expands to the sestet's D-rhyme ('thee', 10; 12; 14). Secondly, the D-rhyme consists solely of 'thee' as the rhyming word. Thirdly, this rhyming pattern further expands to the interior of the lines. The 'Belovèd thee' eventually literally replaces the poetic form by substituting the rhymes with mere repetition, ending climactically with a doubled 'thee' within the last line's internal rhyme. Diegetic physicality and its linguistic medium seem to fuse into one meta-concept; body, selfhood, and words become a unified thematic node. This fusion is then performed and amplified in the indexicality of the sonnets' words which transfers the diegetic world into the 'real' materiality of text, as will be discussed further.

4. The word as index

The Sonnets from the Portuguese materialise the symbolic property of language into indexical representations³, bestowing a physical existence within the reader's reality upon the diegetic world and thus rendering its language non-symbolic. Take, for instance, sonnet II: it begins to count 'only three' (1) who know of their romantic love (the two personae and God). At this point, the textual formatting, syntax, and punctuation dissolves into patterns of three as well. The following three lines are segregated into three clauses respectively. Furthermore, the ellipses also represent a treble design.

³ Although seminal in detail and impact, Saussure was not the first to argue for a concept of arbitrariness in linguistic semiotics. Importantly, Charles Sanders Peirce's sign theory posed a seismic shift in the understanding of material semiotics. Peirce categorises signs as icons, indices, and symbols; which differ according to the relationship between signifier and signified. Symbols, such as linguistic notations, bear no tie between the two; their relation is arbitrary in the sense suggested by Saussure. Indices connect signifier and signified by means of a factual connection. Icons show visual similarities (Turquette, p. 97).

Have heard this word thou hast said,—Himself, beside
Thee speaking, and me listening! and replied
One of us . . . that was God . . . and laid the curse
(2-4)

In sonnet X, the integration of God into the relationship recurs (cf. 3, 11) and again the punctuation turns into three-element punctuation marks.

I love thee . . . mark! . . . I love thee --- in thy sight
(6)

The reader also encounters further indexical expressions, as objects or tropes regarding lengthy shapes are systematically hyphenised: The 'cedar-plank' (X, 4), 'palm-tree' (XXIX, 5), 'altar-stair' (XXX, 7), and the 'prison-wall' (XLI, 3) all represent lengthy objects and are written and sketched simultaneously. Here, the sonnets' textuality shifts the medial use of language to a physical representation, and the diegetic world is immersed into the reader's physical reality. Material text substitutes the syntactically narrated fiction.

In XIII, 'me' is separated from 'myself' with long dashes when the persona explicitly tells of her separation from her 'spirits'. In XV, the insurmountable emotional distance, symbolised by the speaker's unfeeling gaze, segregates the personae emotionally; and in XXVII, his 'upper life' isolates her from him and so does a dash. While describing a physical unification, sonnet XXIX simultaneously expresses an inner rebellion against the personae's closeness – and puts a dash between them.

I love thee . . . mark! . . . I love thee --- in thy sight
(X, 6)

My hand to hold my spirits so far off
From myself –me– [...]
(XIII, 7)

[...] But I look on thee–on thee–
(XV, 10)

[...] the tedious time he had
In the upper life,–so I, [...]
(XXVII, 11f)

I do not think of thee–I am too near thee.
(XXIX, 14)

Further examples physically depict movements, such as casting a ray of light in XIII or the possibility of the Belovéd striking the persona's inner chains in XX, the fall of greenery in XXIX or of tears in XXX.

Between our faces, to cast a light on each?–
(XIII, 4)

Struck by thy possible hand,— [...] (XX, 8)

Drop heavily down,— (XXIX, 11)

As now these tears come—falling [...] (XXX, 14)

The traditional sonnet shape further facilitates a textual organisation of diegetic space, as the division into stanzas creates opportunities for meaningful positioning. Sonnet XXV, for instance, evokes a spherical segregation of 'above' and 'beneath'. While the second quartet ends in 'above the world forlorn' (cf. 8), the first tercet incorporates a semantic field of a 'beneath', with 'drop', 'adown', 'Deep', and 'sinketh' (10f). The stanza break between lines eight and nine then positions the 'heavy heart' within the textual space into the 'beneath' and separates it from the upper sphere. This resonates with the figurative trope of the heavy heart, which seems bound to sink:

Could scarcely lift above the world forlorn

My heavy heart. [...] (8f)

Saussure posits:

'Language and writing are two distinct systems of signs; the second exists for the sole purpose of representing the first. The linguistic object is not both the written and the spoken forms of words; the spoken forms alone constitute the object.' (Saussure, p. 23f)

The signification via the sign's visual materiality in the *Sonnets*, however, shows the potential of the sign's textuality to constitute the object beyond the reach of arbitrary signification and the spoken form. The boundaries between textuality and meaning, and therefore the reality of script and the poetic fiction, are blurred. Barrett Browning creates a love discourse and a discourse of selfhood as language; the love expressed is poetry, not told by it. The resistance against the making of meaning within the syntactical order facilitates a transcended love discourse, defying the imposition inherent in the medium of language to define and therefore to restrict. While physicality and personhood in the diegetic system seem ephemeral, they are stabilised in an intermediary dimension between the reader's reality and the diegesis.

Notably, Clara Dawson attests that voice in Victorian poetry:

'conveys sound and meaning to a reader across or through a printed text. Embedded in material forms, yet nonmaterial in its evocation of a presence beyond the page, voice is caught between its ancient oral past and its contemporary fixity in print. (Dawson 18)

Barrett Browning breaches the gap of diegetic orality and textual fixation by fusing these spheres. The demonstrated indexicality foregrounds text and form as crafted; while the passive, silent (Petrarchan) persona-object is deconstructed, an alternative forceful female creator – the author – seems to take her place.

The last example given in this chapter already crosses the threshold between signifying words and the creation of meaning by means of form. Within this poeticity, new trajectories of expression are facilitated. In playful variants the authorial voice showcases her power of creation by not only asserting her role, but also by expanding the scope of expressibility, eventually allowing for a simultaneousness of traditional love discourses as well as the renegotiation of female authorial space, as will be further discussed in regard to two specific concepts: purified absence and dialectic compositions.

5. Meaning through poeticity (metrics)

Long lines and treble patterns visibly underscore the diegetic imagery of Barrett Browning's sonnets. Admittedly, however, beyond the assertion of language foregrounding and giving shelter to an innovatively negotiated love discourse, they are little more than amplifying features. However, the *Sonnets* significantly expand the semantic scope on the basis of the expanded semantic medium, utilising metric structures to express purified absence.

A series of studies in the field of phonosemantics suggests that there is a link between specific sound elements of languages and their meanings – irrespective of the word's syntactical integration. Adelman, Estes, and Cossu found in 2018, for instance, that English, Spanish, Dutch, German, and Polish operate with phonemes at the beginning of their words signalling its valence (i.e. positivity or negativity). Considering that phonemes that are uttered fastest signal negativity in all languages investigated, they propose that it functions as 'an early warning system in human languages, analogous to other species' alarm calls' (p. 122). Famously, the bouba/kiki effect is a widely corroborated tendency of humans across languages, cultures, genders, and age groups to relate roundness and sharpness to the nonsense words bouba and kiki respectively, even including a preference for people whose faces match the roundness or sharpness of the phonemes in their names (i.e. Bob and Lou as 'round' names) (Barton and Halberstadt, 2018)⁴. These studies suggest that there may be auditory and visual dimensions of text that hold meaning beyond the signification of the word sign, and that this meaning is perceived across languages and cultures. Non-arbitrary linguistic elements should therefore be considered.

In *Sonnets from the Portuguese*, the device of poetic form takes this a step further: not just sound, but the lack thereof is rendered expressive, creating a purified articulation of absence. The first interaction of the I-you dyad, for instance, accommodates several markers: while most of the sonnets remain within the metrical standard of 5-foot iambs,

⁴ Since Köhler's introduction in 1929, the phenomenon has been observed in a large variety of age groups (cf. Ozturk et al.; Maurer et al.; Davis) and across cultures and languages (Davis; Bremner et al.; Sučević et al.; Markovic and Jankovic; Ramachandran and Hubbard), thus providing considerable support to the theory of 'universal sensory underpinnings' of the effect (Styles and Gawne, p. 1).

the 'shadow' carries a dactylic disruption; two unstressed syllables substitute one, and thus create a moment of relative quietness:

A shadow across me. [...] (I, 9)

This strategy of signification recurs. In XXI, the shift to a dactylus within an iambic structure creates silence where silence is meant. A trochaic inversion at the opening of XXIV 5 creates a silent suspension of two unstressed syllables before the 'click', where a stressed syllable strikes. In XXVI, a dactylus creates an additional unstressed syllable where vanishing is expressed. Sonnet XXXIII incorporates an anapaestic foot speaking of dead (thus absent) people. Finally, a trochaic inversion at the opening of XXXIX 13 creates two unstressed syllables where the line speaks of 'nothing'.

To love me also in silence with thy soul
(XXI, 14)

After the click [...] (XXIV, 5)

Their vanishing eyes. [...] (XXVI, 8)

Be heir to those who are now exanimate.
(XXXIII, 10)

Nothing repels thee, [...] (XXXIX, 13)

The sonnet sequence thus radicalises the expression of absence. While tropes such as the shadow may allude to this, their linguistic medium still follows a supplemental or oppositional structure: the shadow is the absence of light or an allusion to the absence of a person. The reader may only understand the absence as against the image of something specific that is potentially present. The metrically induced silence, on the other hand, is simply the absence of an emphasis; and, unlike a word that would automatically signify something, an emphasis does not, by itself, hold meaning. Therefore, the lack of emphasis represents unadulterated, purified semantic absence. Poetic form thus facilitates the expansion of meaning.

6. Meaning through poeticity (verses)

Saussure posits that one fundamental attribute of language is its character as a chain of words. One syntactically organised element follows the other, hence text creates meaning along one dimension (the syntagmatic axis):

'In contrast to visual signifiers (nautical signals, etc.) which can offer simultaneous groupings in several dimensions, auditory signifiers have at their command only the dimension of time. Their elements are presented in succession; they form a chain.' (Saussure, p. 70)

Barrett Browning's sonnets show, however, that this linguistic axiom may be re-negotiated in the context of poetic form. More intricately than through amplified absence, dialectic compositions find shelter in juxtaposed dimensions of the sonnets' words. Angela Leighton rightly determines that the speaker, for instance, consciously 'plays at being both subject and object' (Leighton, p. 102). Indeed, the sonnet sequence implements a dialectic love discourse through at least two features of its poeticity, as the poetic form and regular linguistic creation of meaning both unify as well as separate opposing notions.

Firstly, opposing notions of line and syntactical meaning are implemented. The reader has two options: to delimitate units of meaning either within syntactical logics or within the boundaries of poetical form, namely line and stanza breaks. Depending on the structural container of meaning on which they base their reading, the conveyed discourse of love proves to be diametrically positioned against the other. Sonnet V, for instance, redirects the reader's gaze depending on the line or the syntactical structure. The hierarchical order between the personae thereby switches between two opposing notions: line 4 ('And, looking in thine eyes, I overturn') suggests that the persona surrenders to the Belovèd. The sentence as a whole ('And, looking in thine eyes, I overturn [t]he ashes at thy feet'), however, implies an invading action of manipulating his personal space literally, or his grief figuratively. Line 5 ('[I overturn t]he ashes at thy feet. Behold and see') then demands his attention to her agency, which would imply a self-asserting act, while the full sentence ('Behold and see [w]hat a great heap of grief lay hid in me,') signifies a request for him to look into her inner grief, rendering herself a weaker object of his gaze. The syntactical meaning shows an assertive male gaze, which is subverted by poetic form. Thus, rather than overturning the given discourse, the sonnet creates an alternative poetic subspace, wherein the speaker can assert her own romantic concept. The diegetic partnership is not saturated with a concept of an objectified gazed-at woman, but she also becomes subject and creative force within a dimension of poetic form. This is then repeated in sonnet VI:

Go from me. Yet I feel that I shall stand

Henceforward in thy shadow. Nevermore

Alone upon the threshold of my door

Of individual life I shall command
(1-4)

The syntactical logic suggests a doomed future in which the Belovèd asserts control and absorbs attention, as he casts a shadow upon her. The line breaks, on the other hand, delimitate units which assume independence (cf. 1, 3), liberation from his shadow (cf. 2), and finally command over her own life (cf. 4). The concept of sonnet V is thus expanded towards the future. Again, the envisioned partnership is not saturated within a singular concept of hierarchy or relation, but conserves a dialectic synchrony of opposing notions. In sonnet XXIV, oscillation between separation and mergence is evident between the couple and their environment rather than within the relationship. Lines 11 and 12 suggest an accessible pair, while the whole sentence limits the accessibility to a heavenly sphere after the line and stanza break. Later in the sequence, the couple acts as a unit and negotiates their relation to the diegetic world. The result is similar to the concept within the relationship: they are part of the world and they are

not part of the world. Their relationship transcends the regular parameters of reality and attains a dialectically organised relation by poetic means.

The lilies of our lives may reassure

Their blossoms from their root, accessible
 Alone to heavenly dews that drop not fewer;
 (11-13)

The dialectic reformation of the love discourses between syntactical and line units facilitates a fundamental re-creation rather than a reactive alternative. The examples show that the dimension of independence (as opposed to commitment) is positioned within the poetic form. Freedom is to be found in poetry, while a societal commitment has to be made otherwise.

The syntagmatic axis is thus not simply one linear chain of words, but rather multiple overlain, intertwined word chains organised by more than just syntax. Meaning is created not only by the linguistic sign, but also by poetic form, empowering the reader to take their decision. By means of this semantic undercurrent, the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* create the dialectic of an asserted existence of both personae as poets within their respective poetic realm. Their togetherness is thus created as poeticity, while the syllogistic textual order struggles to express the simultaneous existence of conflicting states or events.

7. Meaning through poeticity (acrostics)

Secondly, acrostics implement dialectic structures, juxtaposing the meaning within the explicit imagery or syntax with a counter motif at the beginning of the lines. The acrostics, without exception, comprise these specific oppositional concepts, and within a sonnet they are found aligned to its beginning, its end, or to one of its stanzas. Roughly a fifth of the sonnets contain acrostics, which suggests a deliberate construction. Sonnet XVI, for instance, portrays the persona as finally surrendering to the Belovéd's courting. Just at this moment of surrender, the acrostic reads 'I ate him', subverting the established hierarchy:

In lifting upward, as in crushing low!
 And as a vanquished soldier yields his sword
 To one who lifts him from the bloody earth,
 Even so, Belovéd, I at last record,
 Here ends my strife. If thou invite me forth,
 I rise above abasement at the word.
 Make thy love larger to enlarge my worth!
 (8-14)

While the face value meaning incorporates the persona into the Belovéd's romantic fiefdom, this act of consumption encases him in the persona's physicality. The superficial perpetuation of knightly sonnet imagery lets the male counterpart prevail, but the transcendence beyond the linguistic semantic means establishes space for the female persona to prevail alongside the male, thereby accomplishing a dialectic doubly asymmetrical relationship.

Sonnet XIX, then, perpetuates the oscillation between female poetic subordination and its conceptual subversion. This time, the female persona receives her Belovéd's lock of hair, (cf. 4), counteracting the theme introduced in XVIII. However, this inversion of romantic gender imagery is immediately overthrown by the allocation of a metaphorical crown to the male's headspace ('bay crown shade', 8). Yet again, this subversion of the image finds its own subversion within the acrostic 'tiara':

The soul's Rialto hath its merchandize;
I barter curl for curl upon that mart,
And from my poet's forehead to my heart
Receive this lock which outweighs argosies,—
As purply black, as erst to Pindar's eyes
(1-5)

The authority of the male crown is balanced out by the tiara, traditionally worn since the late 18th century by powerful women (cf. Munn). The gender hierarchies do not dissolve, but are maintained in a dialectic oscillation between two hierarchical concepts. Both lovers rule and surrender. Once again, the poetic transgression of form and imagery facilitates a female 'counter-reign'. Simonsen posits that the speaker was 'drowned in his [the Belovéd's] being and selfhood' (p. 59), but the more complex double structure challenges this assumption.

The subsequent sonnet XXVI continues this double-edged pattern within the aquatic imagery of 'river-water' for the poetic sphere (cf. 11) and 'dust' for the sphere of societal reality (cf. 6), as well as the fonts as a merging ambiguous metaphor ('As river-water hallowed into fonts', 11). The prime persona inhabits her aquatic visions when the Belovéd comes into play in the second quartet. This stanza creates the acrostic 'boat'.

But soon their trailing purple was not free
Of this world's dust, their lutes did silent grow,
And I myself grew faint and blind below
Their vanishing eyes. Then thou didst come—to be,
(5-8)

Here, the boat represents a worldly device conquering the water. In similar fashion to the fonts, it is both an object of the world and a symbol of civilisation as well as part of the aquatic sphere (hence of her visions). In fact, none of the personae are swallowed by their respective other, but a synthesising concept is created in which they are both fused and separated; they are cohabitants of the same aquatic space, but also each within their own respective realm.

Then, mirroring the transgression of the diegesis and its personae into the sonnets' poeticity and materiality as shown above, the boundaries between letters and living beings are transgressed through an acrostic in XXVIII. The role of language and speech within the lovers' relationship is negotiated. The sonnet's mantra-like repetition of 'said' is especially striking. Considering this pattern, the homophone acrostic 'sat' seems to be a deliberate construction.

Said, Dear I love thee; and I sank and quailed
As if God's future thundered on my past.
This said, I am thine—and so its ink has paled
(9-11)

It indicates a physical counteract to the speech within the speech and resonates with the verbs of lowering action ('sank', 'thundered on', 'lying'; 9, 10, 12), which dominate the sestet. The acrostic thus functions as a hinge between the two trajectories of the sonnet: self-assertion via speech and then physically marked gestures of surrender. Rather than simply transferring the diegetic phenomena into the materiality of text, the acrostics further expand the semantic spectrum by holding up a dialectic tension and simultaneousness between two oppositional concepts.

While the explicit syntactically narrated diegesis defies a synthetic love discourse comprising both personae's contradictory expectations of self-assertion, the sonnets' use of their poetic form creates dialectics which facilitate a relationship beyond syllogistic logic, and therefore beyond societal restraints. The destabilisation of significance by means of a defied or contradictory love discourse simultaneously affects a stabilisation within this structure. It simplifies the discourse to a meta-concept of a refusal to define. The transcendence of diegesis, selfhood, and relationship into textuality shifts the lovers' relationship and world into text. The dialectic structures, on the other hand, show the necessity of this shift, as contradictory concepts may be synthesised within the potency of poetic language. The expanded authorial voice makes use of her power by creating a sphere of alternative logic, thereby facilitating the lovers' togetherness. Here, voice as poeticity equals the dialectic love discourse, and the love discourse immerses and is saturated both in and as poetic form.

8. Conclusion

The voice of the *Sonnets from the Portuguese* is an empowered one that refuses to be specific. It is a voice both within and as poetic form and textuality. While the framework of the diegetic world disassembles, the existence of its inhabitants as well as objects is implicitly questioned. Speech as a descriptor of the diegesis collapses. Moreover, the sonnets subvert the boundary between fictional content and the material medium of text by rendering its words indexical. The strategic utilisation of metrical disruptions creates a signification of purified absence, going beyond the scope of regular semiotics. Furthermore, dialectic simultaneousness emerges in the juxtapositions of line and sentence as well as sentence and acrostic.

The sonnets go beyond simply representing a literary diffusion of significance. By utilising this destabilisation to transcend and stretch the capabilities of linguistic signification, the sequence also goes beyond foregrounding the linguistic medium. Its poeticity renders the syntactical chain a multidimensional network of signification: the word is not merely a signifier of the signified, but also a semiotic node facilitating adhesion of its material textual representation, framework of poetic form, and syntactical logic.

The devices of *Sonnets from the Portuguese* thus negotiate the most central axiomata of structural linguistics: the arbitrariness of the sign in the context of poetry is obfuscated and the chain character of linguistic expression is challenged. Remarkably, by force of their indexical character, even punctuation marks and textual spatiality hold meaning in their own right. For the hermeneutics of poetry, structuralist linguistics may thus function as a referential system against which semiotics through poeticity can be

defined; the interpreter may use linguistic paradigms while re-negotiating their interrelation and inner logic.

So, how does a poem mean? Naturally, this analysis can only provide an answer with regard to the *Sonnets from the Portuguese*. Many of the devices Barrett Browning utilises, however, are specifically poetic, and it may thus be argued that the specific poetic form (and the reader's expectation thereof, including imagery, metrics, line breaks, and rhymes) activate an expanded semiotic potential. This is, then, how a poem can mean.

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